

My name is Velia Koppenhoefer, and I am the mother of Efrén Paredes, Jr. Efrén is one of the youths who was sentenced to life without parole as a juvenile in Michigan. He was sentenced in Berrien County where, to our knowledge, all the youth sentenced to life without parole in the county have been exclusively children of color. Per population Berrien County ranks second highest in the state to sentence children to life without parole.

Efrén, who is Latino, was arrested at age 15 for a murder and robbery, and convicted three months later. He was home with our family when the crime occurred and he has maintained his innocence for over 20 years.

Race was a major issue in Efrén's case that many people have sought to ignore. The town the crime occurred in, St. Joseph, was 95% White. The judge, prosecutor, and all the investigating police were also White. Eleven of the 12 jurors were White and Efrén was the only non-White employee of the grocery store where the crime occurred. Of the two White youth linked to the crime, one received a six month sentence and one was charged with no crime at all. Both of the youth were older than Efrén.

We are not here to discuss the facts of Efrén's case today, however. We are here to express our support for the bills that seek to end life without parole sentences for Efrén and the other more than 350 people who received this sentence when they were children.

Berrien County has a long, shameful history of racism towards people of color. This is evidenced by the large number of minority persons that fill its county jail. Like so many other counties, Berrien County aggressively targets youth of color to receive its most punitive sentences. The culture of racism that pervades its courts infects every level of the justice process resulting in a denial of due process and unfair sentences.

I am often reminded by Efrén's statement that, "Youth of color sentenced to die in prison are collateral damage in the fierce crosswinds of failed public policies." Efrén is among the 70% of children in Michigan sentenced to life without parole.

A report released last week by the National Council of La Raza and Campaign for Youth Justice titled, "America's Invisible Children: Latino Youth and the Failure of Justice," discovered several key facts that underscore the prevalent prejudices that exist in our legal system towards Latino youth and other youth of color.

Latino youth are treated more harshly by the justice system than White youth, for the same offenses, at all stages in the justice system including police stops, arrests, detention, waiver to the adult criminal justice system, and sentencing.

Passage of the bills under consideration by the House Judiciary Committee would support the White House's recent human rights commitment and pledges to the United Nations. In a statement dated April 27, 2009 in support of the United States candidacy for membership in the United Nations Human Rights Council, the following was included:

"We are dedicated to combating both overt and subtle forms of racism and discrimination internationally. The United States is a party to the International Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and is committed to seeing the goals of this covenant fully

realized. Particular emphasis should be placed not only on eliminating any remaining legal barriers to equality, but also on confronting the reality of continuing discrimination and inequality within institutions and societies."

It is important to note that the above-referenced White House document lead to the United States once again becoming a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council on May 12, 2009.

I also believe that sentences for juvenile offenders should not conclude today what kind of adults these youths will be many years from now. As any parent knows, predicting what teenagers will become by next week, let alone when they are adults, is nearly impossible. That key decision should wait until they have reached adulthood and can be assessed more accurately.

In the July 2008 edition of *The Progressive* magazine, writer Luis Rodriguez quoted Efrén. Rodriguez wrote:

In one letter to the public, Paredes makes [an outstanding] point: "If an adult functions with the mentality of a person seventeen years old or younger, that person is deemed mentally unfit to stand trial in most cases. But when a person seventeen years old or younger commits a crime, courts . . . are determining that person has been transformed into an adult. There is something gravely wrong with this faulty logic."

Passage of these bills will not result in the release of a single prisoner. It will merely provide them with an opportunity to receive parole consideration after a certain point. It will be a chance for these people who were sentenced to die in prison to earn their release through rehabilitation.

In the "Spirit of Youth and the City Streets," Jane Addams, the Nobel Prize winning social worker and crusader for the juvenile court, emphasized that youth above all, is about possibility and that "we may either smother the divine fire of youth or we may feed it."

As a mother, daughter, employee of the public school system for nearly 20 years, and citizen of conscience, I categorically reject life without parole sentences because they smother the divine fire of youth. They are an expression of despair that ignores the evolving standards of decency in a civilized society. It is intolerable to basic fairness and should shock the general conscience of society today.

The use of this sentence for juveniles is disproportionate, racially discriminatory, and a clear violation of international law. It is undeniable that many youth offenders can be rehabilitated and become productive members of society. We are asking you to afford young people in our state this opportunity.

**Velia Koppenhoefer • 4031 Woodland Lane • St. Joseph, MI 49085 • Phone: 269-757-4883
www.4Efren.com • <http://Free-Efren.blogspot.com> • http://Twitter.com/Free_Efren**